



Editorial

GLOBAL CERTIFICATION: A PATHWAY TO SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD'S HEALTH WORKFORCE

Julia To Dutka, Peter Preziosi

TruMerit

Author for correspondence: Julia To Dutka  jtodutka@trumerit.org

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ABSTRACT

This editorial examines the role of global certification as a standardized, competency-based framework to validate health professionals' knowledge and practice across jurisdictions while remaining responsive to local contexts. As the health workforce becomes increasingly mobile — whether in person, digitally, or virtually — strengthening global approaches to workforce development is essential to ensuring safe, effective, and equitable care. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that regulatory flexibility, cross-professional collaboration, and competency-based practice can accelerate innovation and improve health outcomes; the challenge now is to sustain and institutionalize these advances.

Global certification offers a pragmatic and forward-looking solution. Drawing on four global nursing and rehabilitation certifications developed between 2019 and 2025, these efforts illustrate how consensus-based standards — developed by subject matter experts from across world regions and income levels — can enhance patient safety, workforce readiness, and professional recognition. These global certifications address longstanding gaps in practice validation, where caregivers may have acquired essential competencies outside formal education pathways.

Beyond quality assurance, global certification supports workforce mobility, reduces duplicative assessment burdens, and enables health systems to respond more effectively to workforce shortages and emerging challenges, including digital health transformation. Importantly, global certification complements — rather than replaces — national regulatory frameworks by providing a trusted, evidence-based foundation for practice competence.

Global certification is a catalyst for a more agile, connected, and confident health workforce. With sustained collaboration and

investment, it offers a hopeful pathway toward future-ready health systems and high-quality care for communities worldwide.

Keywords: Certification, global, workforce, competencies.

INTRODUCTION

In this increasingly interconnected world, the demand for a competent, agile, and responsive health workforce has never been greater. Although COVID is largely behind us, the lessons we have learned compel shifting from discipline-specific, profession-centric to patient-centered, multidisciplinary care delivery models across the care continuum. During the pandemic, the world came together, using good judgment to adjust regulatory and operational requirements to support a more fluid workforce environment that improved health outcomes and saved lives (1, 2). Today's challenge is whether this momentum for achieving standardized, high-quality care across jurisdictional and professional boundaries can be sustained to meet population needs for safe, effective, and efficient care.

Among the most promising solutions are global certification programs, which offer a transformative approach to recognizing and validating the competencies of health professionals worldwide (3, 4). The kernel of the idea to create a global certification for rehabilitation nurses came from the joint effort between TruMerit, a global credential assessment organization for nurses and healthcare professionals and CARF International, an accreditation agency for rehabilitation facilities worldwide. Both recognized that most nurses working in rehabilitation facilities across the world lacked academic training in rehabilitation science and instead acquired the knowledge and skills on the job. Subsequent peer-reviewed research documented gaps in

formal rehabilitation training and supported the need for an exam-based global certification to validate rehabilitation nursing competencies worldwide (5, 6). TruMerit assumed responsibility to create this first global certification in 2019.

Concurrently with this rehabilitation nursing validation effort was a comparable need for certifying rehabilitation health workers, including the physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech language pathologists who have been trained in their respective subject matter specialties primarily in relative silo, without much attention to the multidisciplinary integration required for providing rehabilitation care. Neither have the assistive personnel who are working alongside the nurses and the therapists been properly validated and recognized for their roles. Recognizing that the goals and objectives for the WHO Rehabilitation 2030 (7) cannot be realized without a competent rehabilitation health workforce, we began to develop a suite of global certifications for the rehabilitation field. But because of COVID, we did not complete these exam-based certifications until 2024-25. We have, likewise, reinvented our long-standing Qualifying Exam for first-level, general nurses. Previously aligned with the U.S. licensure exam blueprint, the exam is now based on a globally integrated competency framework that reflects essential nursing practices identified across 50 countries from all world regions and income levels. In 2025, we launched four global certifications – Certified Global Nurse (CGN), Certified Global Nurse – Rehabilitation (CGN-R), Certified Global Health Worker – Rehabilitation (CGHW-R) and Certified Global Health Worker – Rehabilitation Advanced (CGHW-RA). These are examples of how global certification can go beyond local practices to elevate healthcare standards and empower health professionals worldwide to earn a qualification validating their knowledge and practice competence regardless of where they live and work. This article advances a policy-oriented analysis of global certification as a workforce development strategy, drawing on published global health literature and applied certification experience.

BRIDGING BORDERS THROUGH STANDARDIZATION

Global certification serves as a unifying framework standardizing the assessment and recognition of health workers' competencies (8). Unlike traditional credentialing systems that are often confined within national or regional boundaries, global certification transcends these limitations (6). Global certifications typically start with developing a competency framework, drawn from framework documents and supported by voluntary participation from subject matter experts from all world regions and income levels, to create a global competency framework using an iterative process of analysis and debates. The end product is a global competency framework achieved through consensus. This competency framework then guides subsequent test development efforts (9). All exam items undergo a rigorous field review process by additional subject matter experts to ensure that global relevance and cultural sensitivity are observed.

This meticulous process enables stakeholders — governments, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and professional bodies — to collaboratively define and uphold standards that reflect essential practice skills and the core competencies required for safe and effective patient care, regardless of geographic or socioeconomic context.

This process does not impose a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it identifies universal principles of quality care and adapts them to diverse local realities. More than 200 subject matter experts from 46 countries contributed to the 3 global rehabilitation certifications and more than 70 subject matter experts worked through materials from 50 countries to build the global certification exam for first level, general nursing (5). By observing these rigorous principles, global certification ensures that health workers are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet international benchmarks while remaining responsive to the unique needs of their communities. Test fairness and access equity, together with content relevance for local practice, are the pillars of any global certification.

ENHANCING PATIENT SAFETY AND WORKFORCE READINESS

One of the most compelling benefits of global certification is its focus on patient safety. By establishing clear, competency-based standards, these programs help ensure that certified professionals are truly “work-ready.” This means they have demonstrated their ability to deliver care that meets rigorous global criteria, instilling confidence in patients, employers, and regulators alike.

For example, TruMerit's Certified Global Nurse program rigorously evaluates candidates through a comprehensive assessment process that emphasizes theoretical knowledge manifested through real-world clinical skills, critical thinking, and cultural competence. Nurses earning this certification are not only recognized for their expertise but are also empowered to contribute meaningfully to healthcare settings around the world. This recognition is particularly valuable in regions facing acute health workforce shortages, where the ability to quickly and confidently deploy qualified professionals can make a life-saving difference.

Examples also abound in applying global rehabilitation certification to diverse practice-settings. There are nurses who have not yet mastered rehabilitation content in their nursing education and are working directly with rehabilitation patients; there are assistive personnel who have only been trained on-the-job and are providing rehabilitation care; and there are allied health professionals and physicians early in their careers who may be under-prepared for interprofessional practice and multidisciplinary delivery coordination and execution with the care team. Global certification provides the requisite quality assurance for patient safety and for global health workforce development and policy guidance.

Prior research has demonstrated associations between professional certification, workforce preparedness, and job quality, supporting certification as a policy-relevant workforce intervention (9,10).

STREAMLINING MOBILITY AND REDUCING BARRIERS

Health worker migration is a growing trend, driven by factors such as family needs, economic opportunity, professional development, and humanitarian impetus. But the journey from one healthcare system to another is often fraught with bureaucratic hurdles, including redundant training requirements, inconsistent credentialing standards, and lengthy approval processes. Global certification, while not designed to replace jurisdictional requirements, can assist health workers wishing to pursue migration as a career opportunity to demonstrate that they have the knowledge and skills and that they are migration ready by taking the certification exam while remaining employed in their home country (11). Global certification, likewise, can provide a baseline standard for countries to consider as they update their current evaluation systems to include health workers crossing borders to practice as a function of migration policy and opportunities. This openness to incorporating global certifications as a qualification and a first step for migration assessment may provide common ground for validating practice competence across countries and thereby streamlining adjudication of suitability for practice. Global certifications, when appropriately adapted for local use, may resolve some of the intractable procedural hurdles which not only delay the integration of skilled professionals into the workforce but also discourage mobility when global collaboration is essential.

Global certification offers a solution by providing a streamlined, universally recognized credential that attests to a health worker's competence. While local regulatory authorities may still require compliance with specific jurisdictional policies, the standardized competencies embedded in global certification assessments can serve as a first step to significantly reduce the need for retraining or revalidation. This facilitates smoother transitions for health workers and accelerates their ability to contribute to new practice environments.

LOCAL RELEVANCE AND GLOBAL IMPACT

A key strength of global certification is its adaptability. It can actively engage local authorities and institutions in the certification process, ensuring that global standards are contextualized to reflect local healthcare priorities, cultural norms, and resource realities (12). This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and relevance, making global certification not just an external imposition but also a valuable tool for local capacity building.

By aligning global benchmarks with local needs, certification

programs can drive improvements in healthcare delivery at the grassroots level (6). They encourage continuous professional development, support workforce planning, and promote a culture of excellence that benefits both providers and patients. Moreover, they create opportunities for mutual learning and innovation, as best practices from different regions are shared and adapted through a common framework.

Concurrently, global certification should be situated within the broader ethical and equity considerations related to health workforce mobility. International migration of health workers raises concerns regarding workforce depletion in source countries, fairness in recruitment practices, and the balance of benefits between health systems (11). The State of the World's Nursing 2025 (3) highlights persistent global inequities in workforce distribution, credentialing and certification represent a lever for mitigating these dynamics when coupled with ethical recruitment and national workforce planning. Global certification should be viewed as a complementary tool to support transparency, competence recognition, and equity when implemented responsibly.

ELEVATING THE PROFESSIONS, INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

Beyond the practical benefits, global certification also plays a vital role in elevating the status of health professionals. It affirms their dedication to excellence, validates their skills on an international stage, and opens doors to new career opportunities. For nurses, in particular, global certification can be a powerful source of pride and motivation, reinforcing their critical role in delivering compassionate, high-quality care.

Global certifications exemplify this empowerment. They not only recognize the achievements of individual health workers but also contribute to the broader professionalization of nursing and rehabilitation as global health disciplines. By setting high standards and celebrating those who meet them, these programs inspire others to strive for excellence and foster a sense of global community among health workers.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Certification in health professions is commonly pursued as a local effort based on local standards. The concept of developing a set of standards agreed upon by subject matter experts across world regions and income levels to build a global certification program represents a departure from past practices (5). As we look to the future, the importance of global certification will only grow, given the increasingly mobile character of the world's population and the health workforce. The health workforce must be agile, resilient, and prepared to respond to emerging challenges — from climate-related health crises to technological disruptions and demographic shifts. As digital health solutions like telehealth redefine care delivery, global certification becomes a critical tool to support this

transformation (13, 14). It ensures health professionals are equipped with standardized competencies, enabling them to provide safe, high-quality care across borders without leaving their home countries.

Global certification equips professionals with the tools they need to navigate this evolving landscape, ensuring that quality care remains accessible and equitable across borders. To realize this vision, continued investment and collaboration are essential. Governments, educational institutions, employers, and healthcare organizations must work together to expand access to global certification programs, support ongoing professional development, and integrate global standards into national health systems. By doing so, they can build a workforce that is not only competent but also connected — united by a shared commitment to excellence and a common language of care.

DISCUSSION

Global certification is more than a credential; it is a catalyst for transformation. It bridges gaps, removes barriers, and builds a stronger, more cohesive health workforce. We see the tangible benefits of this approach: improved patient safety, enhanced workforce mobility, and empowered professionals ready to meet the demands of a changing world (10).

We encourage global stakeholders engaged in the education, credentialing, certification and assessment, regulation, and policy of the health professions to join us on this journey mediated through research and workforce development approaches (4). As the global health community continues to evolve, embracing and promoting global certification will be key to ensuring that every patient, everywhere, receives the high-quality care they deserve (9). It is a bold vision — but one that is within our reach, if we choose to pursue it together (15).

CONCLUSION

Global certification is a policy-relevant approach to strengthening health workforce competence, mobility, and patient safety in an increasingly interconnected world. Global certification provides a standardized yet adaptable mechanism for recognizing professional competencies and can complement existing regulatory, education, and workforce planning structures. Global certification, aligned with ethical recruitment principles and national health workforce strategies, offers a means of supporting workforce development without worsening global inequities. Collaboration between policymakers, regulators, educators, and credentialing bodies will ensure that global certification is implemented responsibly and efficiently.

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